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Limeliters better than ever

By Philip Elwood
Examiner music critic

QUESTION: "When is two-thirds of the Limeliters trio better than the original whole?" Answer: "When that original two-thirds (Lou Gottlieb and Alex Hassilev) are joined by tenor Robert 'Red' Grammer."

From the summer of 1959 until mid-1963 the original Limeliters group, which included Gottlieb, Hassilev and tenor Glenn Yarbrough, played 'round the world but always made the Bay Area feel like this was their spiritual home.

It was the departure of Yarbrough those 19 years ago that began the demise of the Limeliters, although the original group did reorganize about 10 years ago for a number of "Those Were the Days" concerts.

Now we have a new, "made for the '80s," Limeliters group, with Gottlieb and Hassilev doing their usual thing and newcomer Grammer singing with a style, grace and beauty the likes of which the usually affected Yarbrough never approached.

These newly burnished Limeliters are playing at the Boarding House through Saturday night — they're presenting an hour-long set of lively, mostly new material done with precisely the flare that made the original trio marginally successful.

It is worth noting that although the Limeliters had (and still have) a noisy and dedicated following, especially around San Francisco, they had only one recording get into the Top 60. That was "A Dollar Down," which hit the number 60 spot in May 1961; the Kingston Trio, the Bay Area's other pop-folk group, whose original period of popularity almost exactly duplicated that of the Limeliters, had 11 numbers in the Top 60 between 1958 and 1963.

The latest Limeliters: Grammer, Gottlieb and Hassilev

The current Boarding House presentation by the Limeliters not only features the astonishing and remarkably attractive vocals of Grammer — the trio now also includes a backup quartet, featuring piano (Jay Schneider), drummer (Jim Hobson), bassist (Stuart Gerson) and guitarist Fred Sokolow.

Grammer is an excellent guitarist, as is Hassilev; Gottlieb still fools with a contra-bass now and then. But by freeing the frontline singers (effected by adding the backup quartet) the Limeliters now are creating new sounds out of old and old sounds out of new material.

It is a splendidly musical show, and (as usual) joyously entertaining.

Grammer, despite his seemingly naturally "country" sound (and it's great!) is from New Jersey — he is as refreshing a voice as I've heard in years. He handles all the lead-tenor chores with aplomb and cool — and there is a number called "Take the L Out of Lover and It's Over" which he really commands. A talent worth catching this early; he's going places.

Gottlieb chats and jokes, works through his academic bits (dressed in blazer, gray flannels and all) and speaks for the group. Hassilev's voice, rich and deep, seems in superb shape.

The Limeliters (except, sometimes, for the standoffish Yarbrough) were a happy-go-lucky, punning, sophisticated group. They've retained that mood, now, but I think musically they're better than in their mini-heyday. The backup band (especially pianist Schneider) kicks the singers along and Grammer is pure delight.

They're even doing an old swing-era number or two, including "Begin The Beguine" (to which musicologist Gottlieb incorrectly gives a 1940 pop-record date; the Artie Shaw hit rendition was a smash in 1938).

Not only is the Limeliters performance great fun and grand music; master playing-card magician Ricky Jay opens the show, working both the stage and a table in the audience. Jay is, as Professor Gottlieb would comment, "Something, I'd say, just a bit ahead of else."

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